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**Conrad's *Heart
of Darkness* and
Contemporary
Thought**

Revisiting the Horror with
Lacoue-Labarthe

Edited by

Nidesh Laxetoo

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Introduction: 'An emotion of thought'

NIDESH LAWTOO

Encounters

The origin of this volume lies in what could be called 'a lucky encounter', the encounter with what is, in all probability, the first reading of Joseph Conrad offered by a professional philosopher. 'Philosophical' is, indeed, a term that has often been used to account for Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*. Soon after its initial appearance in *Blackwood's Magazine* in 1899, reviewers commented on 'Mr. Conrad's philosophy' and the 'metaphysics' it entails. And subsequent critics were quick to align Conrad's insights behind the veil of darkness with continental philosophers such as Arthur Schopenhauer and Friedrich Nietzsche. More recently, influential theorists such as Frederick Jameson, Edward Said and J. Hillis Miller among others, have done much to provide a solid conceptual frame to open up a number of theoretical questions that are far from being disconnected from what goes under the rubric of 'continental philosophy': from the subject to the other, language to power, sameness to difference. So, philosophy is not new to Conrad studies, just as Conrad critics are not new to readings of Conrad with philosophical underpinnings. And yet, until now, philosophers by training and profession have themselves remained silent on the theoretical implications of Conrad's most influential tale. One of the goals of this book is to break this silence and inaugurate a new literary-philosophical line of inquiry that revisits *Heart of Darkness* in light of contemporary thought.

The author who provides this volume with a springboard to read Conrad philosophically is the increasingly influential French thinker Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe (1940–2007). Late professor of Aesthetics

at the Université Marc Bloch (Strasbourg) and former president of the *Collège International de Philosophie* (Paris), Lacoue-Labarthe has been an important figure on the philosophical scene over the past three decades. With Jean-Luc Nancy, he was among the very first to promote the work of Jacques Derrida, and with René Girard he is currently considered one of the founding figures of the emerging field of 'mimetic theory'. One of the first critical readers of Jacques Lacan, personal friend of Jacques Derrida, Sarah Kofman and Jean-Luc Nancy (with whom he co-edited the Collection *La philosophie en effet*), privileged interlocutor of Jean-François Lyotard, Luce Irigaray and Alain Badiou, mentor and colleague of Mikkel Borch-Jacobsen, Christopher Fynsk, Avital Ronell and many others, it is not surprising that Lacoue-Labarthe's name is often associated with what currently goes under the general rubric of 'French Theory'.

And yet, like so many of his generation, Lacoue-Labarthe did not identify within the confines of a given school or movement but preferred to align himself with the tradition of Western thought itself. An acute commentator of the origins of literary theory in Greek philosophy (Plato and Aristotle), Lacoue-Labarthe is one of the leading authorities on what he calls 'the metaphysics of the moderns', a metaphysics that includes key figures in the Western philosophical tradition (from Nietzsche to Heidegger, Benjamin to Derrida) and stretches to include their literary counterparts or doubles (from Bataille to Hölderlin, Baudelaire to Blanchot). Conrad also now belongs to this tradition. In fact, in the last decade of his career, the French philosopher turned to *Heart of Darkness* in order to align Joseph Conrad with these influential figures in Western thought.

Lacoue-Labarthe's reading of *Heart of Darkness* is one of those precious pearls whose discovery comes as a surprise and, what is more, at a moment one expects it less. A few months after his disappearance, in January 2007, the journal *Lignes* published a special volume devoted to his memory titled, *Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe*.¹ In addition to numerous moving homages, the concluding section of the volume (titled, 'Textes de Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe') included unpublished or hard to find essays by the French philosopher. Among them was a piece with an open yet intriguing title, especially for Conradian ears: 'L'horreur occidentale'. The content of the essay revealed what one could only have hoped for: a sustained, impressively dense and truly thought-provoking reading

of *Heart of Darkness*. After rereading it with increasing enthusiasm, I sent the article to Hillis Miller. We exchanged a few e-mails and he confirmed my sense that something important was at stake as he remarked: 'so far as I know, it is not quite like anything anyone else has said on Conrad before'. This book introduces Lacoue-Labarthe's philosophical reading of *Heart of Darkness* for the first time to the English speaking world and provides a critical and theoretical context for the initial reception of what is now called 'The Horror of the West' (translated by Hannes Opelt and Nidesh Lawtoo).

The translation of a piece on Conrad's most celebrated and controversial text from an internationally renowned philosophical figure such as Lacoue-Labarthe could not fail to generate a chorus of theoretical responses across both sides of the Atlantic, voices eager to engage with what has already been called an 'event' for literary studies (Hillis Miller). Following Miller's *ouverture*, the volume includes 11 essays that pick up, from different angles, Lacoue-Labarthe's invitation to consider Conrad's tale not only as a literary event but – as he puts it in one of his memorable phrases – also as 'an event of thought' (*événement de pensée*) (112). Critics and theorists who have written influentially on Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* before and are well-read in the tradition of thought Lacoue-Labarthe convokes, join arms in order to respond, further and, at times, challenge Lacoue-Labarthe's insights into what he calls, echoing Conrad, 'the horror of the West'. The main aim of this book is to revisit Conrad's untimely account of 'the horror' in the illuminating presence of Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe in order to open up *Heart of Darkness* to current theoretical tendencies in contemporary thought.

The moon and the halo

The intellectual unity of this book is guaranteed by the centralizing force of its 'centrepiece', as well as by the single, yet protean problematic that informs all the essays that surround it. As Lacoue-Labarthe puts it at the beginning of 'The Horror of the West', his fundamental concern is to explore what he calls the 'emotion of thought' (*émotion de la pensée*) (111) *Heart of Darkness* has the power to generate. This characteristic oxymoronic phrase joins two registers of experience that, from the beginning of Western thought,

have tended to be considered in opposition, due to an 'ancient quarrel' between philosophy and literature. Lacoue-Labarthe's phrase, thus, makes clear that his reading of *Heart of Darkness* is part of his career-long effort to overturn this ancient antagonism in order to establish a critical dialogue between these exemplary traditions. As he puts it in *L'imitation des modernes*, his fundamental concern is to address 'the question of the relation [rapport] between literature and philosophy'.² Thus, throughout his career, Lacoue-Labarthe consistently argued that emotion and thought, specialists of affect (or *pathos*) and specialist of concepts (or *logos*) are far from being mutually exclusive but gain from being considered in relation to each other. This structural polarity is at the heart of 'The Horror of the West' and provides this volume with a specific conceptual/affective line of inquiry.

This book's single concern with the relation between emotion and thought and, more generally, literature and philosophy, functions as a centripetal, unifying force that connects all the essays that follow. But it is important to stress that this force opens up a panoply of decentralizing, centrifugal questions located at the uneasy juncture where different disciplines, perspectives and areas of thought meet, interpenetrate and fertilize each other. Aesthetic and politics, ethics and psychology, theology and economics and mythology and ontology are but some of the areas of knowledge that Lacoue-Labarthe and his commentators rely on in order to revisit *Heart of Darkness* in light of contemporary horrors.

Conrad's tale addresses problems that continue to make the headlines of our contemporary world, such as racial and gendered oppression, colonial and imperial power, material exploitations and genocidal horrors. This volume not only addresses these problems but also questions the underlying emotional and conceptual logic that informs the horrors that ensue from them. Contributors are thus particularly attentive to the complex relation that ties myth to violence, desire to ideology, contagion to (will to) power, colonial ideas to fascist practices and the death drive to collective traumas. If *Heart of Darkness* constitutes an 'event of thought', then, it is also because it is a text that strives to make us see that 'the West is the horror', or, as Lacoue-Labarthe also says, that the horror is what the West 'must necessarily think of itself' (112).

In a way, the questions that guide the different sections of this book all aim to reveal the theoretical implications of such a striking

affirmation. They include the following: What does *Heart of Darkness* teach us about the relation between the psychic and the social? What is the link between aesthetics and politics? What is the role of *techné* in the exploitation of nature and people? Why does ideology need the *pathos* of voice and the *logos* of myth in order to gain power over the modern masses? What does the horror of colonial practice tell us about the horrors of the twentieth century and the traumas that ensue? And what is the ethical responsibility of the West for more contemporary genocidal terrors? These and other characteristically Lacoue-Labarthean questions open up Conrad's celebrated novella to a multiplicity of innovative perspectives which all eventually lead us back to the singular-plural problematic that runs through the entire volume, namely, how to respond, engage with and address the 'emotion of thought' (111) that, according to the French philosopher, renders *Heart of Darkness* both a literary event and 'an event of thought' (112)?

Taking their clues from 'The Horror of the West', contributors to the volume address problems in Conrad's tale that are often treated in isolation but that, after Lacoue-Labarthe, must be reconsidered in relational, interdisciplinary terms. This involves exploring the uneasy cross-road where affect and thought, literature and philosophy, politics and ethics meet, confront and address each other. Some of the articles do so by aligning themselves with Lacoue-Labarthe, others are ambivalent in their evaluation and still others position themselves contra Lacoue-Labarthe. And yet, all the essays fundamentally engage with the line of inquiry the French philosopher opens up in order to further his insights into 'the horror of the West'. For instance, Stephen Ross argues *with* Lacoue-Labarthe that affect and ideology as they operate in *Heart of Darkness* need to be understood in relation to each other and suggests that Kurtz's insatiable desire for ivory reveals a wider, catastrophic desire that drives capitalist ideology *tout court*. Along similar lines, but in a different context, Beth Ash articulates her *différend* from Lacoue-Labarthe by considering the traumatic, melancholic affects that emerge from Western horrors, while at the same time furthering the psychoanalytical line of inquiry that informs 'The Horror of the West'. On the philosophical front, Henry Staten argues, this time *contra* Lacoue-Labarthe, that Conrad's artistic craft (*techné*) is not so much concerned with the metaphysical voice of nature (*physis*) but, rather, with phallogocentric phantasies about what nature is, or should

be. These are but some of the specific articulations of the 'emotion of thought' that suddenly become visible if we revisit Conrad's tale 'in the company of Lacoue-Labarthe' (Miller's phrase). Since all the essays draw their source of inspiration from the conceptual landscape mapped by the French philosopher, a continuous, organic argument that connects the different sections of the book naturally ensues as we move from the mythic to the ideological, ethical, political and metaphysical implications of the horror.

At the level of method, contributors adopt different perspectives, from deconstruction to psychoanalysis, feminism to cultural materialism, Marxism to narratology and postcolonial studies to trauma studies. This heterogeneity is, once again, in line with Lacoue-Labarthe's philosophical approach in general and with his effort to reveal the multilayered implications of Conrad's elusive insights into the 'horror' in particular, implications that cannot easily be contained within a single, totalizing, homogeneous perspective.

Readers of this volume might worry that, in what follows, theoretical approaches will simply be mapped onto literature, thought onto emotion. But it is important to stress that Lacoue-Labarthe's investigation of the relation between emotion and thought in *Heart of Darkness* is in line with aesthetic principles that are already intrinsic to Conrad's poetic thought itself. In *A Personal Record*, for instance, Conrad makes clear that one of his major preoccupations concerns precisely that 'interior world where *this* [the artist's] *thought and his emotions* go seeking for imagined adventures' (my emphasis).³ For Conrad then, as for Lacoue-Labarthe after him, there is no thought without emotion, no literary adventure without conceptual explorations. This dual emphasis on both feeling and thought is central to Conrad's literary project, so central that he does not hesitate to reiterate it in what is probably the most often quoted passage of his poetics. As he famously writes in the 'Preface' of *The Nigger of the 'Narcissus'*: 'My task which I am trying to achieve is, by the power of the written word, to make you hear, to make you feel – it is, before all, to make you see'.⁴ As Marlow's voice also makes clear in *Heart of Darkness*, feeling is far from being antithetical to seeing; the darkness of bodily senses are far from being opposed to the more rational or luminous senses.⁵ Rather, it is the conjunction between 'feeling' and 'seeing', 'emotion' and 'thought', 'moon-like' senses and 'sun-like' senses that, in Conrad's view, gives readers the possibility to catch 'that

glimpse of truth for which [we] have forgotten to ask'.⁶ Or, to put it in the language of *Heart of Darkness*, this literary-philosophical conjunction allows us to approach 'the appalling face of a glimpsed truth' that is at the heart of Kurtz's confrontation with the horror.⁷ Lacoue-Labarthe's account of what he calls, in a phrase that will require further explication, the 'truth of the West', is there to make sure we do not forget to ask this essentially Conradian question and that we do so in light of our contemporary preoccupations.

In the spirit of Lacoue-Labarthe's conviction that literature does not need philosophy to think, let alone make readers think,⁸ the essays in this book refrain from applying a theoretical perspective to a literary text, mapping concepts from the outside in order to solve problems inside. Instead, contributors cast light on the thoughts which, in their views, are already internal to Conrad's tale itself. This also means that the so-called *conceptual* meaning of the text cannot easily be detached from the linguistic *form* that would supposedly contain it. Hence this meaning cannot be summed up in neat philosophical 'theses' that would nicely stand apart, once the 'literary shell' has been cracked open. This point is, once again, in line with the poetics that informs *Heart of Darkness*. In order to account for the distinctive characteristic of Marlow's yarns, the frame narrator famously says:

to him the meaning of an episode was not inside like a kernel but outside, enveloping the tale that brought it out only as a glow brings out a haze, in the likeness of one of these misty halos that, sometimes, are made visible by the spectral illumination of moonshine. (48)

This striking Conradian image illustrates, perhaps better than any other, the spirit, inspiration (both affective and conceptual) and the implicit methodological assumptions of this book. In fact, the task critics and theorists set themselves is not so much to crack philosophical riddles hidden inside the tale but, rather, to provide the proper background, one might even say, the right atmosphere, for these riddles to appear and be made visible first, and subsequently be revisited in a new literary/philosophical light.

Given the pervasive use of this analogy in the essays that follow, it is perhaps not surprising that Conrad's impressionistic metaphor eventually came to give form to the general outline of this book,

delineating its figure (or *Gestalt*) from the inside-out. Thus, if the volume situates Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe's essay at its *centre*, it is surely not to signify that the philosophical 'meaning' or 'truth' of *Heart of Darkness* is neatly contained within it – no matter how penetrating Lacoue-Labarthe's reading of Conrad is. Rather, this is to suggest that 'The Horror of the West' provides a powerful, stimulating and, above all, illuminating philosophical reflection *on* – as well as *of* – Conrad's tale. Furthermore, if all the other essays are positioned *around* 'The Horror of the West', this is surely not to suggest that they simply serve as an external frame for Lacoue-Labarthe's central piece – no matter how effective such a framing is. Rather, their position at the 'margins' is to better 'centre', 're-centre' and, at time, 'decentre' specific claims made in the centrepiece. Above all, this positioning is instrumental in bringing out the meaning of the horror that informs Conrad's tale itself – the real throbbing heart of the book and direct source of light around which everything else turns.

The chorus

This book, then, turns around two main voices: the voice of the French philosopher situated at the centre of the volume and the chorus of theoretical voices situated all around it. Together they resonate in a multiplicity of ways in order to make us both feel and see the 'emotion of thought' that a mythic text like *Heart of Darkness* continues to generate in the twenty-first century.⁹ In order to frame this chorus of singular-plural voices, the volume is book-ended by two influential theoretical figures who are ideally positioned to comment on the importance of Lacoue-Labarthe's reading of *Heart of Darkness*: the literary critic and theorist J. Hillis Miller and the philosopher Avital Ronell. These figures are intimately familiar with Lacoue-Labarthe's work. They are not only among the most respected and influential theoretical voices in contemporary thought but, like Lacoue-Labarthe himself, they also belong to the same generation of thinkers who contributed to opening up literary analysis to its philosophical 'outside'. It is thus an honour to have their voices open and conclude the book.

Miller's 'Prologue' starts by emphasizing his sense of admiration for Lacoue-Labarthe's essay as well as its critical and philosophical

importance for contemporary thought. Thus, he does not hesitate to call 'The Horror of the West' 'one of the best [essays] ever written' on Conrad's novel (18). This is not a minor compliment, especially given the impressive amount of criticism *Heart of Darkness* has generated over more than a century. And yet, Miller's reading of Lacoue-Labarthe is not only laudatory but also critical. This is certainly a type of engagement Lacoue-Labarthe would have welcomed – if only because for the French philosopher, as for Nietzsche before him, thinking was also thinking *against* himself. In a second moment, thus, Miller tactfully but incisively engages with the political, aesthetic and metaphysical implications of 'The Horror of the West', delineating major conceptual and methodological differences between his own (Biblical) approach to *Heart of Darkness* and Lacoue-Labarthe's (Hellenic) approach. Miller's response to the emotion of *thought Heart of Darkness* ('revisited in the company of Lacoue-Labarthe') generates, opens up fundamental questions concerning the relation between truth and revelation, affect and the rhetorical power of language. Above all, Miller paves the way for future engagements with 'The Horror of the West', sets the theoretical tone of the volume and inaugurates a philosophical dialogue with Lacoue-Labarthe for contemporary thought to continue exploring. In the 'Postface', Avital Ronell, a privileged interlocutor of Lacoue-Labarthe, both echoes and balances Miller's opening piece by accounting for the *emotion* of thought that ties her to the French philosopher, while, at the same time, articulating the theoretical urgency for us today to engage with this untimely thinker whose 'worthy *oeuvre*' is barely beginning to be discovered.

Part 1, 'Mythic Darkness', includes contributions by three influential Anglo-American theorists and critics who join their philosophical and literary sensibility in order to engage with the religious or, as Lacoue-Labarthe would prefer to say, 'mythic' implications of *Heart of Darkness*. Hillis Miller's now canonical essay 'Heart of Darkness Revisited' has been reprinted in other collections before, but it gains a second life from being positioned right after his new 'Prologue' (aptly titled 'Revisiting "Heart of Darkness Revisited"') in a contrapuntal relation to 'The Horror of the West'. According to Miller, both his and Lacoue-Labarthe's essays illustrate two different, yet related, hermeneutical principles that run deep in Western philosophical thought: Lacoue-Labarthe belongs

to the Hellenic/Heideggerian tradition, whereas Miller belongs to the Biblical/Derridean one. The difference that underscores their reading of 'the horror' rests on two distinct, yet related ontologies, ontologies that question the possibility or impossibility to reveal the 'essence' of the West. The two authors, however, ultimately agree in taking seriously the metaphysical implications of *Heart of Darkness* and in revealing the ethical and political horrors this apocalyptic/mythic text gives us to think. Michael Bell pursues this mythological line of inquiry by situating Conrad's tale (as well as Lacoue-Labarthe's discussion of 'myth') in a wider modernist context that includes European literary figures such as Thomas Mann, W. B. Yeats and D. H. Lawrence but also theoretical figures such as Nietzsche and Freud. Bell argues that the category of 'the myth of the West' Lacoue-Labarthe invokes to account for *Heart of Darkness*'s 'mythic power' needs to be qualified by considering what he calls the 'struggle of rival myths' that informs the modernist *Weltschmerz*. Finally, cultural critic Jonathan Dollimore furthers this Freudian/Nietzschean line of inquiry by diagnosing the degenerative forces that infect Western civilization and generate perverse figures à la Kurtz. Giving cultural 'density' to Lacoue-Labarthe's claim that the horror emerges from a psychic 'void', Dollimore pushes psychic categories beyond the pleasure principle and reveals the metaphysics of oblivion that haunts both *Heart of Darkness* and Western civilization as a whole. Dollimore provocatively combines psychology with sociology and theology with ontology in order to unmask the contradictory push-pulls towards/away from the threatening forces of 'self-dissolution' that, in his view, are constitutive of the metaphysics of darkness we repress yet secretly and perversely desire. These essays are not uncritical of specific aspects of 'The Horror of the West'; yet, they all share the Lacoue-Labarthean concern to read literature philosophically and philosophy poetically in order to reveal the mythic forces that continue to affect and infect the West.

These initial contributions articulate the implicit philosophical assumptions of 'The Horror of the West' and prepare the ground to approach the second and central section of the book, where the encounter of 'Conrad *avec* Lacoue-Labarthe' takes place. Since Lacoue-Labarthe's reading of *Heart of Darkness* is extremely dense, theoretically multi-layered and relies on a conceptual apparatus the philosopher assumes his audience to be already familiar with, I open this section with a preface to 'The Horror of the West'. The

aim of this piece is not so much to offer an original interpretation of Lacoue-Labarthe's account of Conrad's tale but to offer what Jacques Derrida would call a 'doubling commentary' [*commentaire redoublant*].¹⁰ This frame situates some of the main concepts Lacoue-Labarthe mobilizes in his reading of *Heart of Darkness* in the context of the general economy of his thought.

Then follows the centrepiece around which all the essays revolve. 'The Horror of the West' is unique in both style and approach and escapes easy summaries. It offers no neat, pre-packaged theses for me to sum up here, except the one stated in the title: Lacoue-Labarthe argues that the horror is 'of the West' because the West – from the Roman conquest to the Holocaust – continues to generate horrors, for others. In order to support this claim, he aligns Conrad with an impressive number of figures in the Western philosophical tradition (from Plato to Augustine, Diderot to Nietzsche, Benjamin to Lévi-Strauss and Heidegger to Lacan) and argues that 'the horror of the West' cannot be dissociated from an essential 'void' at the heart of Western subjectivity, an 'absence of any proper being [*être-propre*]' (116). This lack of being, in his view, renders the modern subject radically vulnerable to all kinds of psychic infiltrations, incantations and mimetic manipulations by charismatic leader figures like Kurtz endowed with the (will to) power to subjugate the modern masses.

For the French philosopher, then, 'the horror' Conrad makes us see is both interior and exterior, subjective and objective, psychic and social and political and ontological. It is a horror that is located not only at the heart of subjectivity but also at the heart of empires and continues to be responsible for Western atrocities. Above all, Lacoue-Labarthe strives to make us see that *Heart of Darkness* is a (mythic) tale that reveals the devastating (philosophical) 'truth' about the West, namely that the 'West is the horror' (112). Lacoue-Labarthe finds evidence to support this point in the 'technique of death' [*technique de la mort*] (119) massively used in the twentieth century. This is not the first time that Lacoue-Labarthe addresses these problems. They constitute a *leitmotif* in his thought and are at the heart of his confrontation with Heidegger's take on *techné*, the latter's complicity with Nazism and his refusal to address the horrors of mass-extinction in the aftermath of Auschwitz. Lacoue-Labarthe's reading of *Heart of Darkness*, as so many of his late texts, is haunted by the most harrowing horrors the West ever managed to produce: the horror of the Holocaust.

Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe is an ideal candidate to open up Conrad studies to this heavy dossier, whereby aesthetic, psychic, ethical, political and metaphysical principles come together in order to re-evaluate the origins of Western techniques of will to power. As Jacques Derrida reminds us in 'Desistance': 'on these grave and formidable problems, I know no judgment more sure than Lacoue-Labarthe's, none more rigorous and prudent.'¹¹ That Conrad was among the first to foresee and denounce the implications of this apocalyptic event testifies to what Lacoue-Labarthe calls 'an event of thought' (112). This is by no means the only contribution of Lacoue-Labarthe's reading of *Heart of Darkness*. 'The Horror of the West' offers radically new insights on philosophical/literary concepts as diverse as 'myth', 'affect', 'ideology', 'mimesis', 'art', 'genius' and 'techné', to name a few—insights that open up an entirely new conceptual register to continue to talk critically about Conrad in the twenty-first century.

As a coda to this central section, the French philosopher, specialist of African thought and intimate friend of Lacoue-Labarthe, François Warin, offers a deeply felt homage to the dead friend. He does so by revisiting their 'African adventures', whereby the two philosophers were confronted to a Dagara funeral ceremony, in the company of Conrad's novella. The first part of the essay bears witness to the sacred horror of sacrificial death; in the second part, Warin extends Lacoue-Labarthe's considerations on Western 'techniques of death' by offering a philosophical/postcolonial reading of how the West continues to be implicated with, and partly responsible for, recent genocidal horrors perpetrated on African soil. As he provocatively asks: 'what closer reenactment of Kurtz's atrocities than the Rwandan genocide?' The horror, Warin argues, has not stopped to plague Africa and is still, in many ways, the horror of the West.

Part 3, 'The Affect of Ideology', concentrates on the affective dimension of Lacoue-Labarthe's reading of the horror and argues that the psychic dimension of *Heart of Darkness* needs to be reconsidered in the context of larger social forces that affect the entire body politic. Jacques Lacan is a key reference in 'The Horror of the West', and the contributors in this section do much to account for catastrophic forms of desires that haunt Western culture as a whole. Thus, Stephen Ross builds on Lacoue-Labarthe's reference to the Lacanian *la Chose* and argues – via Derrida, Levinas and

Marx – that the logic of desire in *Heart of Darkness* and in the West needs to be reframed within a larger lack of an 'ethics of alterity' that should denounce the horrors of 'global capitalism' and the fetishism for capital it continues to generate. Along similar psychoanalytical lines, but writing from a perspective informed by narratology, Claude Maisonnat zeroes in on Lacoue-Labarthe's take on 'voice' and argues that a polyphony of different voices, including French ones, operate in *Heart of Darkness* and must be taken into consideration in order to fully hear the haunting power of 'the horror'. Beth Sharon Ash concludes this psychoanalytical section from the perspective of the emerging field of trauma studies. While agreeing with Lacoue-Labarthe's reading of Kurtz as a 'tragic hero' confronted with the horror of death, her psychoanalytical *différend* leads Ash to focus on Marlow as traumatized subject and to argue that the horror of trauma and the melancholy it generates requires communal working-through first, in order to subsequently face 'the horror of the West'. These essays all acknowledge their debts to Lacoue-Labarthe's *psychic* insights into the horror and do much to articulate the complex logic that ties ideology to affect, the social to the psychic and the political to the personal.

Part 4, 'The Echo of the Horror', includes three essays concerned with an intrinsic (formal) perspective on *Heart of Darkness* that is equally attentive to the extrinsic (gendered, ethico-political and metaphysical) implications of the tale. Henry Staten opens this part by acknowledging the importance of Lacoue-Labarthe's attempt to articulate 'the very essence' of Conrad's text but then continues in a more critical vein. Articulating his resistance to Lacoue-Labarthe's (Heideggerian) reading of the horror allows Staten to propose a (Nietzschean) reading of the human, all too human phantasies that resonate in Marlow's phallogocentric view of nature, revealing what he calls 'the most mystified level' of Marlow's experience, a Dionysian experience with the horror of death that structures the tale as a whole. Situating Lacoue-Labarthe's reading of Conrad in a wider intellectual community to which both Jacques Derrida and Jean-Luc Nancy belong, Martine Hennard Dutheil de la Rochère both confirms and supplements Lacoue-Labarthe's account of the horror of *techné* by considering Conrad's fascination for the technique of X-Rays. Drawing on both textual and contextual evidence that shows the importance of this other *technique de la mort* in Conrad's tale allows Hennard Dutheil to 'sound the

hollowness' at the heart of male, colonial bodies and, by extension, of the Western body politics at large. I conclude this section by considering the innovative *mimetic* line of inquiry in Conrad studies Lacoue-Labarthe opens up. Extending Lacoue-Labarthe's Platonic/anti-Platonic take on the question of affective mimesis to the multiple 'enthusiastic outbreak[s]' that structure the tale, I argue that the controversy concerning gender, race and ideology in *Heart of Darkness* must be reconsidered in light of the politics of mimesis vastly amplified in our contemporary, mass-mediatized world. Together, these essays provide three different readings of the horror that counter supplement, and echo, in their own singular voices, lines of inquiry opened up by 'The Horror of the West'.

After revisiting *Heart of Darkness* in the stimulating company of 'The Horror of the West', the book concludes with an interview with the American philosopher, feminist theorist and literary critic Avital Ronell about Lacoue-Labarthe. As a former colleague and close personal friend of Lacoue-Labarthe, Ronell is ideally placed to step back and delineate the general importance of this increasingly influential thinker for literary studies and contemporary thought. Echoing Miller's 'Prologue', Ronell's 'Postface' not only casts precious light on the importance of Lacoue-Labarthe the philosopher but also adds a deeply felt reminiscence of the 'emotion of thought' that ties her to Lacoue-Labarthe the man. In so doing, Ronell offers precious guidance as to how to learn to 'listen' to the singularity of his voice, evaluates the timbre of Lacoue-Labarthe's rhetoric, including the 'rigorous hesitations' that distinguish him from other contemporary thinkers, while at the same time discussing the philosopher's sense of 'mission', 'struggle' and 'task' that, in his view, is constitutive of the experience of thought.

In sum, the centrepiece of this volume and the diversified theoretical halo that surrounds it function as a reminder that if *Heart of Darkness* continues to be an 'event of thought' it is not simply because this mythic text is now integral part of the Western imagination; it is also because it lifts the veil on Western horrors we often do not want to see, let alone acknowledge. Above all, it reveals an ongoing difficulty for the West to face the horrors we continue to generate, in the name of the myth of humanism – for others. If the manifestations of the horror change historically, and the horror of the West constantly transgresses the boundaries of one single nation, country or continent, this does not mean that

contemporary readers are not supposed to interrogate the aesthetic, psychological, ethical, political, religious, material and ontological causes of such horrors. In fact, despite their variety of perspectives and insights, the contributors to this volume agree in thinking that it is only if we inquire about the 'emotion of thought' *Heart of Darkness* generates for us today that we can have a chance to approach that 'glimpse of truth' Conrad attempts to make us see. This is, indeed, the challenge that the contributors to this volume were ready to pick up, in the illuminating company of 'The Horror of the West'.

Finally, before we begin, let us recall that if Lacoue-Labarthe's name may sound new to many ears, the fast-growing number of studies that are now beginning to be written on him only confirms what his friends and colleagues were quick to recognize during his lifetime. As Jacques Derrida puts it, his is a voice that addresses the questions that 'will have to be thought tomorrow'.¹² 'The Horror of the West' is one of those untimely philosophical arrows aimed towards the future Lacoue-Labarthe did not get to see. Luckily, however, his arrow arrived – and he is now addressing us. His voice, not unlike Marlow's, is a voice that cannot be silenced. The task to respond to it, as adequately as we can, is now left open to that future to which, *volens nolens*, we belong.

Notes

- 1 Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, *Lignes* 22 (mai 2007).
- 2 Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, *L'imitation des modernes* (*Typographies* 2) (Paris: Gallimé, 1986). Unless specified otherwise, translations of works by Lacoue-Labarthe unavailable in English are the editor's.
- 3 Joseph Conrad, *A Personal Record* (New York: Doubleday, 1924), xx.
- 4 Joseph Conrad, 'Preface', *The Nigger of the Narcissus* (New York: Doubleday, 1924), xi–xvi, xiv.
- 5 Plato called vision 'the most sunlike of all the instruments of sense' (Plato, *Republic*, in *The Collected Dialogues of Plato*, ed. E. Hamilton & H. Cairns, trans. P. Shorey [New York: Bollingen Series, 1963], 575–844, 6.508b, 743) and, of course, theory comes from Greek, *theoria*, to look.
- 6 Conrad, 'Preface', xiv.

- 7 Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*. In *Youth: A Narrative and Two Other Stories* (London: J. M. Dent & Sons Ltd., 1923), 45–162, 151. Henceforth all quotations to *Heart of Darkness* in this volume are from this edition.
- 8 Lacoue-Labarthe (with Heidegger) liked to speak of 'thinking poetry' [*poésie pensante*] or, better, thinking *prose*, because (with Benjamin) he was fascinated by 'the idea of poetry as prose' (Heidegger: *La politique du poème* [Paris: Galilée, 2002], 50).
- 9 Harold Bloom, in his critical evaluation of Conrad's tale, also admits that '*Heart of Darkness* has taken on some of the power of myth' ('Introduction', *Joseph Conrad's Heart of Darkness*, ed. Harold Bloom (New York: Infobase, 2008), 7–11, 10).
- 10 As Derrida reminds us this mimetic practice, while being but a precondition for true reading to take place, 'is not easy', especially if its aim is not so much to 'protect' but to 'open' a critical reading. Jacques Derrida, *De la grammatologie* (Paris: Editions de Minuit, 1967), 227.
- 11 Jacques Derrida, 'Introduction: Desistance', in Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, *Typography: Mimesis, Philosophy, Politics* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989), 29.
- 12 Derrida, 'Desistance', 6.

Prologue: Revisiting 'Heart of Darkness Revisited' (in the company of Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe)

J. HILLIS MILLER

The contributors to this volume have been asked to say something about Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe's superb essay on *Heart of Darkness*, 'L'horreur occidentale, translated now as 'The Horror of the West'. I hope the phrase in my title, 'in the company of', does not seem disrespectful of Lacoue-Labarthe's memory. I mean to call attention by that phrase to the strong presence in his essay of the author's voice speaking to his auditors, as when he says, 'This evening, in front of you, I would like to try to justify myself, [*essayer de me justifier*]... This type of exercise, as we know, is dangerous. I therefore ask you, in advance, to forgive me [*Je vous demande à l'avance de bien vouloir m'en excuser*] if my remarks will be a little experimental' (111–112). When I read his essay, Lacoue-Labarthe seems to be speaking to me too, as well as to his original auditors. He exhorts me to see his reading of *Heart of Darkness* as a bearing witness that may need excusing or that may be an act of self-justification.

Excusing and self-justifying, we know, are speech acts. They are performative, not constative, utterances, as is the act of bearing witness through speech, through a voice. Both Lacoue-Labarthe and I have a lot to say in our essays about voice as testimony in *Heart of Darkness*. Conrad's novel, we both say, is made of a relay of